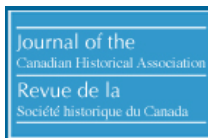


Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Provincial Solidarities: The Early Years of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, 1913–1929

David Frank

Volume 19, numéro 1, 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037430ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/037430ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Frank, D. (2008). Provincial Solidarities: The Early Years of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, 1913–1929. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 19(1), 143–169.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/037430ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cette étude met en relief l'importance des premières fédérations provinciales du travail à titre de syndicats ouvriers distincts dans le Canada du début du XX^e siècle. Parmi celles-ci, la Fédération du travail du Nouveau-Brunswick a essayé de solidifier les liens de solidarité locaux et de représenter les travailleurs à l'échelle de la province. Cette fédération a été créée, et était dominée, par des hommes travaillant dans les métiers spécialisés des villes les plus larges de la province. En 1921, elle attirait près d'une centaine de délégués venus de neuf agglomérations, y compris un petit nombre de femmes et d'Acadiens. Son action s'est manifestée par des campagnes en faveur de l'indemnisation des accidents du travail, de la protection des femmes ouvrières et de l'élection de candidats travaillistes, mais son programme exhaustif de reconstruction, le « Reconstruction Programme » élaboré en 1919, a connu moins de succès, en particulier dans le contexte de la crise économique régionale des années 1920. L'étude confirme l'existence d'un mouvement progressiste au sein de la société de la province, tout en soulignant l'étendue limitée de ses ambitions et de ses réalisations. Ce travail repose sur des méthodes d'histoire sociale pour explorer le discours institutionnel et analyser un chapitre distinct de l'histoire du mouvement syndical au niveau provincial.

Provincial Solidarities: The Early Years of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, 1913–1929

David Frank

Abstract

This study draws attention to the importance of the early provincial federations of labour as a distinct form of labour organization in early 20th-century Canada. One of the first of these was the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, which attempted to strengthen local bonds of solidarity and represent workers at the level of the provincial state. The Federation originated with and was dominated by male workers in the skilled trades in the largest cities and by 1921 attracted almost 100 delegates from nine population centres, including a small number of women and Acadians. Its agenda included campaigns for the enactment of workers' compensation, the protection of women workers and the election of labour candidates, but a more thoroughgoing Reconstruction Programme (1919) was less successful, especially in the context of regional economic crisis in the 1920s. The study confirms the existence of a progressive movement within provincial society while identifying the limited scope of its ambitions and achievements. This study uses social history methods to explore an institutional narrative and to analyze a distinct chapter in the history of organized labour at the provincial level.

Résumé

Cette étude met en relief l'importance des premières fédérations provinciales du travail à titre de syndicats ouvriers distincts dans le Canada du début du XX^e siècle. Parmi celles-ci, la Fédération du travail du Nouveau-Brunswick a essayé de solidifier les liens de solidarité locaux et de représenter les travailleurs à l'échelle de la province. Cette fédération a été créée, et était dominée, par des hommes travaillant dans les métiers spécialisés des villes les plus larges de la province. En 1921, elle attirait près d'une centaine de délégués venus de neuf agglomérations, y compris un petit nombre de femmes et d'Acadiens. Son action s'est manifestée par des campagnes en faveur de l'indemnisation des accidents du travail, de la protection des femmes ouvrières et de l'élection de candidats travaillistes, mais son programme exhaustif de reconstruction, le « Reconstruction Programme » élaboré en 1919, a connu moins de succès, en particulier dans le contexte de la crise économique régionale des années

1920. L'étude confirme l'existence d'un mouvement progressiste au sein de la société de la province, tout en soulignant l'étendue limitée de ses ambitions et de ses réalisations. Ce travail repose sur des méthodes d'histoire sociale pour explorer le discours institutionnel et analyser un chapitre distinct de l'histoire du mouvement syndical au niveau provincial.

They met at the Oddfellows Hall in Saint John on Tuesday 16 September 1913. It was a small assembly, but the delegates represented a large constituency and an even larger body of expectations. They came from Sackville, Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John, carrying credentials from local unions and labour councils, and from a variety of occupations, including barbers, blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters, cigar makers, electrical workers, iron moulders, longshoremen, painters, plumbers, printers, railway carmen, and stonecutters. Although there were only 20 delegates in attendance, all of them men and mainly from Saint John and Moncton, the *Eastern Labor News* did not hesitate to describe the event as "a large and representative meeting."¹

The day after that short meeting local newspapers in Saint John underlined the significance of the event. "A movement of importance to the working men of the province was advanced a stage yesterday," stated *The Standard*, "A Provincial Federation was formed and arrangements made for closer co-operation in promoting labor legislation and all matters in the interests of the working class." The *Daily Telegraph* described the aims of the new organization in similar terms: "to bring all the unions of the different towns of the province into closer touch so that demands made by the new body may have greater weight than those of any separate existing organization." Only a few items of business were transacted, but participants were pleased with the outcome. P.D. Ayer of the Moncton Trades and Labour Council, who presided at the event, predicted that as more unions joined, "the federation will speedily become the legislative medium and the fighting machine for organized labor within the province." And a correspondent in the *Eastern Labor News* observed that the New Brunswick Federation of Labour was now "an accomplished fact."²

In the writing of Canadian labour history, the provincial story is generally overlooked, and the labour history bookshelf includes only half a dozen general histories of provincial labour movements.³ Yet labour history in Canada has been a profoundly regional experience, and for most of the past century most

1 *Eastern Labor News* (20 September 1913).

2 *The Standard* (17 September 1913); *Daily Telegraph* (17 September 1913); *Eastern Labor News* (20 September 1913).

3 The first of these was Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: British Columbia Federation of Labour, 1967). This was followed by Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1979); Doug Smith, *Let Us Rise! An Illustrated History of the Manitoba Labour Movement*

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK
FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

Canadian workers have lived and worked under labour and employment regimes enacted and administered by the provincial states. As a result, the varied local, occupational, national, and international affiliations of labour have been supplemented by bonds of solidarity based on the political and spatial contexts of the provinces. From this perspective the provincial federations of labour were an additional expression of accelerating solidarities within the labour movement. In its early years the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC) appointed provincial executive committees who reported to the annual convention; but in 1910 the TLC adopted a policy of encouraging affiliated unions to create full-fledged provincial federations of labour, not unlike the state federations organized by American Federation of Labor unions in the United States. British Columbia unions formed a federation in 1910 and Alberta in 1912, and New Brunswick was the only other province to implement this strategy prior to the First World War.⁴

The study of a provincial federation is necessarily a form of institutional labour history, but it is also a study in working-class agency as expressed through a particular kind of social movement. In renewing attention to this theme of trade union organization, there is much to be said for a critique articulated some years ago by Howard Kimeldorf in a debate on “Why we need a new old labor history.” The substance of that discussion was that the “new” social history offered opportunities to strengthen explorations of classic and significant questions in the field, including issues of structure and mobilization, solidarities and exclusions, representation and negotiation that determine the conditions of working-class effectiveness and the stability of class relations in capitalist society.⁵ Within the

(Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985); and Bill Gillespie, *A Class Act: An Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, 1986). The latest is Jim Warren and Kathleen Carlisle, *On the Side of the People: A History of Labour in Saskatchewan* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2006). Québec has been well-served by Jacques Rouillard, whose *Histoire du syndicalisme au Québec des origines à nos jours* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1989) is now available in a 2004 edition, *Le syndicalisme québécois: Deux siècles d'histoire*.

4 Harold A. Logan, *The History of Trade Union Organization in Canada* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 168.

5 Howard Kimeldorf, “Bringing Unions Back In (or Why We Need a New Old Labor History),” *Labor History*, 32, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 91–103, followed by responses from Michael Kazin, Alice Kessler-Harris, David Montgomery, Bruce Nelson, Daniel Nelson, 104–29. See also the roundtable discussion, “What Next for Labor and Working-Class History?” in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (Fall 1994): 7–92. The present study arises from a Community-University Research Alliance on provincial labour history supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For the project website, see <www.lhtnb.ca>. For a recent discussion of the project, see Carol Ferguson, “Re-Connecting with the History of Labour in New Brunswick: Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Issues / Nouveau regard sur l'histoire du travail au Nouveau-Brunswick : Les enjeux contemporains vus dans une perspective historique,” *Acadiensis*, XXXVII, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 76–85.

context of Canadian labour history, the regional experience can be usefully addressed through both institutional and social history approaches, as both are concerned with the general issue of the distribution of power within the society.

In this case, a reading of one chapter in New Brunswick history discloses the emergence of organized labour as a new force within provincial politics in the era between the coming of the Great War and the arrival of the Great Depression. During this period the New Brunswick Federation of Labour succeeded in attracting the attention of governments and achieving legislative reforms that were important to many workers, including those who did not belong to unions. This in turn produced a measure of recognition for labour within provincial society. At the same time the Federation's achievements were limited by a number of contingencies rooted in the complexities of the working-class experience in the province. The solidarities represented by the Federation remained partial, for like other provincial federations they conformed to the dominant structures of international unionism and represented only a minority of the province's workers. Their influence was strongest among skilled tradesmen and large employers in the southern industrial cities of Moncton and Saint John, rather than among rural producers in the woods or women in service or factory employment. Moreover, their agenda was limited by the moderate labourist ideology of the times, some of which was accommodated by the provincial state while more fundamental challenges were set aside. In the context of an ongoing crisis related to the integration of the regional economy into North American capitalism and the political weakness of the Maritime Provinces within Confederation, the Federation leaders nonetheless pursued their objectives with a brave face, remaining optimistic about the prospects for a progressive consensus within provincial society.⁶

Plans for a federation of labour in New Brunswick were underway at least as early as the spring of 1912, when the Saint John Trades and Labour Council invited their counterparts in Moncton to discuss the idea. In June of that year the veteran union leader J.J. Donovan, of the Saint John cigarmakers' union, spoke at a meeting of the Moncton Trades and Labour Council. Donovan explained that the provincial government too easily turned a deaf ear to labour concerns from any one section: "A Provincial Federation would accomplish the desired result and lead to united action by every union in New Brunswick

6 For the regional context, see Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance," in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, ed. Craig Heron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 43-86. See also the chapters on the 1910s and 1920s in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, eds. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muike (Toronto/Fredericton: University of Toronto Press/Acadiensis Press, 1993). On the labourism of this era, see Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour / Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 45-75, and James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK
FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

which no government would care to ignore.” The proposal received ready endorsement, and on Labour Day that year delegates assembled at the Longshoremen’s Hall in Saint John, where they unanimously voted to form “an organization to be known as the New Brunswick Provincial Federation of Labour.” Also in attendance was Warren Franklin Hatheway, the Saint John reformer and former Member of the Legislative Assembly, whose efforts to advance the cause of labour were often frustrated by the political leadership of the province. He congratulated the meeting and again underlined the logic of a federation: “a body representative of all the labor interests of the province would have a much greater influence than the individual union or the Trades and Labor Council of a particular section.” Provisional officers were elected, and it was agreed to meet as early as Thanksgiving Day or at another time “at the call of the executive.”⁷

Such a call was never issued, and over the course of the winter the movement for a federation came to a standstill. This situation did not sit well with two Saint John labour men, who used the pages of the Moncton-based *Eastern Labor News* to breathe new life into the idea. Longshoreman Fred Hyatt was an Old Country union man who had served in the British Army in India before immigrating to Canada. He was also a vocal proponent of socialist ideas, who argued that organizing workers was part of a larger effort to reform society: “The Provincial Federation of Labor could be made an actual fact and its influence felt if it was organized along the lines followed by British Columbia and Alberta, and adopted a platform which stood for the worker to receive the full product of his labor, which would be something worth fighting for.” In his view, capitalism had arrived in full force in New Brunswick, and workers would have to combine for their mutual protection: “The slogan should be ‘workers unite’ and wake up New Brunswick.” Hyatt was ably, if more moderately, seconded by James L. Sugrue, one of the younger generation of labour leaders coming to the fore in Saint John: “I think it time the matter of forming a Provincial Federation of Labor was resurrected. It would certainly be a pity to allow this matter to fall through as the time seems opportune for the formation of such an organization.” Sugrue gave a telling example of labour’s inability to secure meaningful reforms. After a year and a half of agitation by the unions for a fair wage clause in government contracts, the legislature had passed a Fair Wage Schedule Act that was barely two sentences long and totally lacking in standards or provisions for enforcement. “What a splendid piece of legislation,” scoffed Sugrue. “The workers should certainly be proud of the lawyers, doctors and business men who are representing them.” He concluded with a call to

7 *Eastern Labor News* (1 June, 15 June, 29 June, and 7 September 1912). On Hatheway, see *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XV and Gerald H. Allaby, “New Brunswick Prophets of Radicalism, 1890–1914” (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1972).

action: "Let's quit acting comedy, brothers, and get down to business. We need a Federation of Labor in this Province and the time is ripe for its formation."⁸

A portrait of Sugrue shows a youthful, energetic face, hair brushed high, steady eyes and the hint of a pleasant smile. Although Saint John had a long labour history and there were plenty of local labour veterans, Sugrue was still in his twenties when he came to prominence. Born in 1883, he had grown up in west-end Saint John, the son of an Irish immigrant who was an influential teacher in the city's Catholic schools. His older brother John Sugrue became an officer of the bricklayers' and masons' union, and "Jimmie" Sugrue became a leader of Local 919, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, named as their financial secretary in 1910 and business agent in 1913. In 1912, he was elected president of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council. The emergence of Sugrue as a local leader coincided with an upsurge of labour activism in the community, and leaders such as Sugrue were setting optimistic goals. As he explained in 1912, "In the long run we hope to so improve conditions here that the people won't leave for the west in search of better wages and shorter hours of labor."⁹

Sugrue's part in the renewed effort was recognized when he was elected as the first president of the Federation of Labour at the organizational meeting in September 1913 and again at the founding convention in Saint John in January 1914. On this occasion the 35 delegates represented 15 union locals as well as the labour councils in Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. The largest group were the eight representatives from the Saint John longshoremen, the oldest union in the province, though Sugrue must have been chagrined that fully 28 of the official delegates were from Saint John. When they voted on a constitution and by-laws, one of the first amendments was to elect vice-presidents to strengthen support in other places. Vice-presidents were chosen for Moncton, Fredericton, Sackville, and Saint John, including three men who were not present at the meeting.

In setting their course, the Federation adopted resolutions on several matters to be presented to the government. Although the texts were not reported in

8 *Eastern Labor News* (29 March 1913). In September 1912, Sugrue was attending meetings of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in Guelph, Ontario, and did not participate in the Saint John meeting that made the first attempt to organize a federation. As a member of the provincial executive committee for New Brunswick, Sugrue reported in May 1913 on the earlier effort by provisional officers as follows: "Owing to the lack of interest of one of these officers nothing was accomplished." Trades and Labour Congress, *Proceedings*, 1913, 35.

9 *Standard* (2 September 1913); *Eastern Labor News* (21 September 1912). For biographical details on Sugrue, see *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XV. The carpenters, for instance, won a \$3 daily wage and an eight-hour day in their trade, and in the summer of 1913 more than 1,000 men at the local lumber mills were off work seeking wage increases and union recognition. On Labour Day that year Saint John workers came out in large numbers, estimated at 2,000, to march in the biggest Labour Day parade in years.

the minutes, the list shows the range of their agenda: scaffolding at construction sites, payments for jurors and witnesses, free school books and supplies for children, a Fair Wage Clause, a Bureau of Labour, Workmen's Compensation, and an item headed simply "women workers." Beyond this, the officers were instructed to procure a charter from the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, and the next meeting was set for July 1914 in Fredericton.¹⁰ It was a modest beginning, but the Federation of Labour was now visible on the province's political landscape. When they met six months later at the Pythias Hall in Fredericton, the city's mayor welcomed the delegates, and there was the same formal recognition when they met at the Woman's Christian Temperance Union Hall in Moncton the following year.

Meanwhile, two notable events in 1914 kept the larger labour question in the public eye and did so in contrasting ways. The first of these, in Saint John in late July, was a large and violent strike. When the street railway workers attempted to negotiate a contract, their president was fired and the company rejected a settlement recommended by a conciliation board, on which Sugrue represented the employees. The impasse led swiftly to a test of strength in the streets, where public opinion was clearly on the side of the strikers. In his study of the strike, Robert Babcock has documented the recruitment of strikebreakers, the assembly of huge crowds, the charge of the Royal Canadian Dragoons down King Street, an attack on the power plant – and the settlement of the strike. As Babcock has written, "a deep-seated local tradition of crowd action reinforced the developing class-consciousness of Saint John workers." While the events demonstrated practical forms of solidarity in the streets, they also revealed the continued resistance facing workers who asserted the right to union recognition and collective bargaining.¹¹

A few weeks later there appeared to be a higher level of acceptance for unions when delegates from across Canada arrived in Saint John for the annual

10 "New Brunswick Federation of Labour Minutes" (hereafter "NBFL Minutes"), 20 January 1914, 1 July 1914, 11 January 1915, and 1 July 1915. At the latter meeting the frequency of meetings was reviewed and they met annually thereafter. The earliest proceedings are in minutebooks, but were published in a printed form beginning in 1918, and then in typewritten form from 1923 to 1933; from 1918 onwards they are cited here as *NBFL Proceedings*. No official minutes for 1916 and 1917 were located, though accounts of those meetings are found in other union records. According to the *Globe* (20 January 1914), delegates proposed that the Bureau of Labour, created in 1908 under the Provincial Secretary, be placed under a separate official "who would be a member of the government and a representative of the labor interests in it." *The Standard* (21 January 1914) reported that the amendments to the Fair Wage Clause proposed that contractors on public works be required to pay union wages. According to TLC President Claude Jodoin, who stated in 1956 that the NBFL was the oldest provincial federation in existence, a charter signed by James C. Watters and Fred Bancroft was issued on 25 February 1914. *NBFL Proceedings*, 1956.

11 This account is based on the study by Robert H. Babcock, "The Saint John Street Railwaymen's Strike and Riot, 1914," *Acadiensis*, XI, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 3–27.

convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. The TLC had met annually since the 1880s, but only once in the Maritimes, in Halifax in 1908. When Sugrue attended the 1912 convention in Guelph, Ontario, he proposed that the next meeting be held in Saint John. Sugrue was determined to bring the TLC to New Brunswick, once arguing, for instance, that "Montreal is not the eastern extremity of Canada, despite the fact that some of our international executive officers seem to think so."¹² For the 1914 meetings, Sugrue served as chair of the Reception Committee, which published 2,000 copies of a souvenir booklet supported by a grant of \$500 from the provincial government.¹³ In welcoming the delegates, he hoped the event "would tend to give an uplift to the organized workers of the Province of New Brunswick."¹⁴ Certainly New Brunswickers turned out in force, with a total of 36 delegates from Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John among the 147 delegates from across the country. The debates and resolutions featured numerous labour speakers capable of debating labour issues with much expertise.¹⁵ One of the highlights of the meetings was a speech by one of the key early American labour feminists, Leonora O'Reilly. As a leader of the Women's Trade Union League, she was at the peak of her influence, having won wide attention for exposing conditions at the Triangle Shirt Waist factory in New York, where 146 women workers had perished in the burning building three years earlier. "Fighting O'Reilly," as she introduced herself, gave the delegates a "striking description" of organizing efforts in the United States and made "a strong plea for the organization of women." When O'Reilly declared that "we want an eight hour day, a living wage and full citizenship for women," she was interrupted by applause and went on to add: "All

12 *TLC Proceedings*, 1913, 35. See also *Standard* (16 and 17 September 1912). Montréal had been agitating for the honour for several years.

13 Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB), Executive Council Papers, RS9, Box 52, Sugrue to Provincial Secretary, 1 August 1914, and Provincial Secretary to George R. Fuller, 4 August 1914. No copies have been located to date, but a similar booklet was published for the Calgary meetings in 1911, which included an announcement of plans for a provincial federation.

14 *TLC Proceedings*, 1913; *TLC Proceedings*, 1914, 3.

15 President James C. Watters, a Vancouver Island coal miner and socialist, presented a wide-ranging report, and there were well-informed speeches by delegates such as George Armstrong of the Winnipeg carpenters, who discussed the problem of counterfeit union labels, and James Simpson of the Toronto printers, who called for the payment of wages to apprentices attending technical school. James Sugrue was much in evidence on the platform throughout the convention, and other New Brunswick delegates also joined the discussions: Saint John delegates C.H. Stevens and C.E. Harrison supported more training for street railway workers; Seymour Powell of the Moncton boilermakers called for more technical education for apprentices; Edwin Thomas proposed laws to regulate private detective agencies. In addition, a written appeal from Ella Hatheway of Saint John, president of the Saint John Women's Suffrage Committee, met with a favourable response and the Congress passed a resolution in favour of the extension of votes to women.

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK
FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

we have accomplished through fights, we should have written into the laws of the land so that the next generation can avoid the struggles which we have been compelled to make.”¹⁶

The presence of O'Reilly and others drew an optimistic picture of opportunities for solidarity among workers across lines of gender, region, and country, yet in September 1914 the union movement was already divided by the arrival of the Great War. For the past three years the TLC had passed resolutions denouncing “capitalist wars,” and on the first day of the Saint John convention one resolution condemned the war as the “organized murder of the workers of the various countries” and called on Canadian workers to bring about “a speedy termination of the war.” The resolution did not come to a vote, and before the meetings ended the TLC had affirmed its support for the war effort. Still, delegates were concerned about maintaining union rights under wartime conditions. Substantial new government spending was expected, and delegates called for union rates and hours on all government contracts. When Dominion Minister of Labour T.C. Crothers arrived, delegates treated him to a long round of criticism for the government's failures to follow its own fair wage policy in letting contracts for public works. Sugrue and others joined in presenting resolutions for the appointment of fair wage officers for each of the provinces.¹⁷

During the war years the labour cause in New Brunswick was far from dormant, and, like other social reformers of the time, union leaders continued to advance a progressive agenda. At the January 1915 meetings, the Federation called for protection of the interests of New Brunswick workers in the distribution of wartime contracts. But the war effort did not loom large in their proceedings, as delegates left contentious issues such as conscription for the attention of the TLC. Other resolutions in 1915 called for municipal and provincial governments to use union label supplies. There was discussion of establishing a labour newspaper, to carry on the work of the defunct *Eastern Labor News*. Other resolutions called for free textbooks for schoolchildren as well as the provision of free medical, dental, and eye examinations in the schools.¹⁸ In the later stages of the war, the Federation was opposing the employment of interned prisoners or the importation of “Orientals” to deal with

16 Her appeal to union members was based not only on ideas of solidarity, but also on the self-interest of union members: by organizing women, male union members would protect themselves against “the possibility of unorganized women crowding men out of employment by the lower rate of wages they would accept.” According to the *Globe* (23 and 24 September 1914), O'Reilly “made a deep impression” on the delegates. The newspaper reports spell her name as O'Riley. For a brief biography, see *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 651–3.

17 *Globe* (22 September 1914).

18 “NBFL Minutes,” 11 January 1915; *Globe* (12 January 1915).

labour shortages. In 1918, they were also calling for the protection of female employees in factories, agricultural training for returning soldiers, representation of labour on public boards, government ownership of railways and utilities, proportional representation in politics and extension of the franchise to women.¹⁹

Most of all, the Federation continued to press for improved laws for the compensation of workplace death and injury, regularly passing resolutions and sending delegations to Fredericton. This was an issue with a long history. While a Liberal government in 1903 had adopted a Workmen's Compensation for Injuries Act, it was more accurately considered an act to limit the liability of employers for workplace accidents. The Act was based on the premise that injuries at work were a risk assumed by the individual worker, unless the employer could be proved negligent in some respect; even if the employer was held responsible, awards could not exceed a total of \$1,500. At the time of the 1908 election, the Conservatives called for an improved law and increased benefits, and the election of Hatheway as a government member was a promising sign. But the revisions that followed were a disappointment: they raised the limit on benefits and closed a loophole by including within the scope of the coverage accidents caused by "any person in the service of the employer," but the law still excluded many workers; moreover, claims would still need to be pursued in court, a costly and uncertain undertaking for a working-class family.²⁰

With the emergence of the Federation, the compensation laws had a high priority on the labour agenda. Sugrue pressed the case at an interview with the cabinet in March 1916, where union leaders were told that a commission of inquiry would be appointed shortly. When this did not happen, Sugrue renewed pressure, writing repeatedly that summer.²¹ The turning point came in early 1917, when the government appointed a commission of inquiry. In addition to a chairman and two employers' representatives, the commission included two labour members. The selection of Sugrue recognized the part of the Federation in the agitation, and the choice of Fred Daley of the Saint John longshoremen

19 *NBFL Proceedings*, 12 March 1918. See also New Brunswick Museum (hereafter NBM), Saint John Typographical Union No. 85, S118-6, report of the meeting in Minutebook, 1907-30.

20 For the changing legislation, see *Statutes of New Brunswick*: 1903, chap. 11; 1907, chap. 26; 1908, chap. 31; 1912, chap. 32; 1914, chap. 34. For context and analysis, see especially William Y. Smith, "Axis of Administration: Saint John Reformers and Bureaucratic Centralization in New Brunswick, 1911-1925" (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1984), 47-71, and Robert H. Babcock, "Blood on the Factory Floor: The Workers' Compensation Movement in Canada and the United States," in *Social Welfare Policy in Canada: Historical Readings*, eds. Raymond B. Blake and Jeff Keshen (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995), 107-21.

21 See PANB, Executive Council Papers, RS9, Box 54, folders for 15 February and 7 June 1916; Box 55, folder for 3 January 1917.

acknowledged the prominence of the issue on the docks of Saint John, where Daley's brother, president of Local 273, International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), had been killed in a waterfront accident in 1913. Although the Conservative government lost the provincial election in February 1917, the new Liberal government continued to support the commission.

One of their first tasks was to examine the new legislation enacted in Ontario in 1914 and Nova Scotia in 1915. These were laws of a new type, for instead of assuming individual responsibility for workplace danger they introduced a form of public insurance.²² At the time of the Federation's annual meeting in Fredericton in May 1917, a committee of delegates was named to meet with the provincial government. Their timing was right, as the commission had prepared an interim report. With that in place, the delegates left the Trades and Labour Hall on Regent Street to meet with the cabinet and, according to their own report, "in able manner presented the claims of labour for about 2 hours."²³ Returning to the convention, they stated that the government was prepared to amend the existing legislation in accordance with union recommendations. That afternoon the convention was addressed by the veteran Hatheway, whose struggle for better compensation laws had now been effectively taken up by the province's unions.²⁴

At a time when the war continued to exact a bloody toll at the front, there was continued progress in addressing the cost of casualties within the domestic economy. The commission's report was tabled on 15 March 1918, and a bill introduced the same day by Attorney-General J.P. Byrne, who stated that the

22 Compensation claims were considered by an independent board, using a standard schedule and, most importantly, without regard to the cause of the accident, as long as it arose from conditions of employment; workers and their families could thus expect standard benefits without regard to their ability to seek restitution in the courts. The costs were paid by a form of taxation based on payroll lists and occupational categories; indeed, by increasing the liability of employers for accidents at work, the premiums were expected to create an incentive for promoting safe conditions at work. For the developing context of contemporary legislation, see Eric Tucker, *Administering Danger in the Workplace: The Law and Politics of Occupational Health and Safety Regulation in Ontario, 1850–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

23 NBM, International Longshoremen's Association Papers (ILA) 273 Minutebook, May 1917–October 1917, "New Brunswick Federation of Labor report," 17 May 1917 (report of delegates to NBFL Convention, 14–15 May 1917). For the full list of resolutions presented to the government, see PANB, Executive Council Papers, RS9, Box 56, folder for 11 July 1917.

24 An interim report was dated 14 May 1917. See "Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Working of the Ontario and Nova Scotia Workmen's Compensation Act," *Journals of the House of Assembly*, 1917. Public hearings were held in Saint John, Fredericton, Woodstock, Moncton, Chatham, Bathurst, and Campbellton. At each location one or more of the commissioners, usually including Sugrue, listened to evidence given by workers, employers, doctors, journalists, and others. Local union leaders took a prominent part in making the case for the new laws.

principles “had been approved by the Federation of Labor and also by a number of employers of labor in the province.” The new law accepted the premise that workers and their families were entitled to compensation for death and injuries arising out of their employment and that the costs should be a charge upon the employers. The change was “revolutionary in its character,” noted one of the opposition leaders — with evident approval. Sugrue watched the progress of the bill closely, and at one stage he appealed to the Saint John longshoremen to send a representative to Fredericton to help him lobby the members.²⁵ There were certainly numerous limitations: important categories of workers were excluded — farm labourers, domestic servants, clerical workers, police and firemen, and a variety of “casual” workers — and there was no debate on an amendment that added fishermen to the list of excluded occupations, even though at least nine men had been lost in a disaster on the water at Caraquet as recently as 1914. There was controversy about including workers in the lumber industry, as recommended by the report. In the course of the debate, the government amended its own bill in order to exclude logging in the woods and work on the river drives, two of the most hazardous occupations in the province. Opposition members charged that the government was giving in to powerful lumber interests: “The proposed amendment would destroy the effectiveness of the Compensation Act and would not be satisfactory to the province as a whole or to the labor interests.”²⁶ The bill was adopted on 26 April, imperfect legislation but a sign that the province was prepared to accept limited reforms in response to the expressed needs of organized workers. Much would depend on the administration of the Act, and union leaders were pleased with the appointment of Sugrue as one of the three full-time members of the Workmen’s Compensation Board.²⁷

25 NBM, ILA 273 Minutebook, 20 March 1918.

26 *Synoptic Report*, 1918, 33–4, 260–1, 277–9. For the progress of the bill, see PANB, RS24, Bill 23, 1918. There was also a plan to provide a list of industrial diseases covered by the Act. However, a critical reading of the Act should also draw attention to limitations characteristic of contemporary progressive legislation. Exclusions for willful misconduct and intoxication were uncontroversial. Benefits generally were to be closely assessed on the basis of the extent and duration of incapacity and a worker’s past earnings, as well as other possible sources of income; contributory negligence could be taken into account and payments could not exceed 55 per cent of earnings; while death benefits could be as high as \$3,500, disability benefits could not exceed \$1,500. In the case of fatalities, surviving children received a benefit to the age of 16 and widows were entitled to \$20 per month and a final benefit upon remarriage. In its first year of operations, the Board considered a total of 2,746 claims and authorized payments of \$89,619.27. See *First Annual Report of the Workmen’s Compensation Board of the Province of New Brunswick* (1919), 7, 20.

27 Initially Sugrue was to be paid less than the other members, but he appealed and his salary was raised to the level of the vice-chairman, \$3,000 per annum; in 1920 the chair was paid \$4,500 and the other members \$3,500. See PANB, Executive Council Papers, RS9, Box 58, folder for 2 October 1918; Box 59, folder for 1 May 1919; Box 61, folder for 17 April 1920.

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

It was hardly an age of harmony. Union membership continued to grow again after 1917, but there were no guarantees for union recognition or collective bargaining. A sensational situation arose in Saint John in 1917, when several striking members of Local 531 of the United Association of Journeymen Plumbers faced charges of intimidation, arson, and murder. The general organizer for Canada, the Australian-born John Bruce, remained on the scene almost continuously that spring and summer, holding frequent strike meetings and raising support from other unions. He went on to hire lawyers, organize a defence committee, raise funds and pay benefits to the families. The case drew attention in union newspapers across the country as well as at meetings of the TLC in Ottawa and of the international union in Toledo. It was an effective demonstration of labour solidarity, but the outcome was only a partial vindication for the workers. There were no convictions, yet the charges of arson and murder had seemed to place the union on the wrong side of the law. Moreover, the strike was lost, and the issues of the eight-hour day, good wages, and union security were swept aside. The local was dissolved a few years later.²⁸

At the end of the war there was renewed energy in the ranks of labour, much of it directed at building a new world in which the rights of workers were more fully recognized. This was the main theme in the Reconstruction Programme adopted by the Federation of Labour in March 1919:

The world war has forced all people to a fuller and deeper realization of the menace to civilization contained in autocratic control of the activities and destinies of mankind. It has opened the doors of opportunity, through which more sound and progressive policies may enter. New conceptions of human liberty, justice and opportunity are to be applied.

This extensive document, drafted by three of the Saint John delegates, provided a prescription for postwar democracy that recognized the rights of workers and their place as citizens of the province. The Programme insisted on the right to union organization as a requirement for cooperation between workers and employers and argued that the same right should also be extended to workers in the public sector. The importance of the eight-hour day was underlined as essential to health, citizenship, productivity and moral, economic, and social well-being; to this end, the working week should be limited to five and a half days and overtime hours prohibited except in emergencies. The law should also be changed to prohibit the employment of children under the age of 16, and women workers were to be entitled to “the same pay for equal work” —

28 The account here draws on an unpublished 2006 paper by George Vair, “The 1917 Plumbers Strike,” as well as a diary in Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), John Bruce fonds, MG31 B8, vol. 2.

although they were also to be protected against performing jobs that “tend to impair their potential motherhood.” Concerns about the labour market were also addressed: immigration was to be suspended for three years while the society adjusted to postwar conditions, and private employment agencies were to be abolished in favour of public employment services jointly operated by workers and employers. There was a strongly worded statement on freedom of speech and public assembly, an echo of concerns about the use of the War Measures Act and other restrictions in wartime. Public ownership of utilities and resources, particularly the province’s waters, was seen as necessary to protect the public interest, and cooperatives were encouraged because they protected the worker from the profiteer. Educational opportunities were to be improved, especially in technical subjects (and teachers were encouraged to affiliate with the union movement). Home ownership was to be promoted by giving low-interest loans and building housing through public works in times of under-employment. It was not a radical programme by early 1919 standards. Indeed, the section on political policy warned that independent action by labour could divide their political influence and that improved legislation could be achieved through “the education of the public mind and the appeal to its conscience.” Nonetheless the Reconstruction Programme embraced a broader distribution of social rights and economic rewards as the basis for a healthy society. It was a call for full recognition of the needs of workers and their place as citizens in provincial society: “No element in this province is more vitally concerned in the future of this province than the working class.”²⁹

When the Federation met in March 1919, however, it was without a president. Sugrue had taken his place at the Compensation Board as a member of the provincial labour bureaucracy in late 1918. Attention turned to the first vice-president, a young Acadian railway machinist from Moncton. Céline Antoine Melanson was born in rural Kent County in 1885, the descendant of a long-established Acadian family. As a young man he came to work in Moncton, where the Intercolonial Railway was the city’s largest employer. He started as a labourer in the railway shops and was soon promoted to the more skilled work of a machinist. As a member of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), Melanson acquired a good knowledge of labour matters; he also improved his skills and his English by taking correspondence courses. In 1914, members of IAM Lodge 594 chose him as a delegate to the TLC convention in Saint John. They also chose him as a delegate to Federation meetings, where he was elected a vice-president in 1915, as well as in 1916 and 1918. Melanson’s election in March 1919 as the Federation’s second president recognized the importance of

29 “The Reconstruction Programme Of New Brunswick Federation of Labor,” *Daily Gleaner* (21 March 1919). The document was drafted by three Saint John delegates: J.E. Tighe, F.A. Campbell, and E.L. Sage; but clearly incorporated a wide range of concerns.

the railway workers in Moncton. Significantly, although the Federation functioned entirely in English at this time, it was also recognition — even encouragement — for the participation of Acadians in the labour movement.³⁰

Melanson led the Federation in a time of growth. In 1919, there were only 29 delegates at the annual meetings, but in the 1920 convention call he and the new secretary-treasurer, George Melvin of Saint John, appealed for all New Brunswick unions to send delegates: “we need the support of every Union in the Province — let this Convention be the greatest one in the history of the Federation.”³¹ At the 1920 meeting, there were almost twice as many delegates as in 1919, and the following year the 1921 convention in Saint John was the most representative provincial assembly of labour to date, with 86 delegates from nine centres in attendance, representing 7,000 workers. More than half the delegates were from Saint John, but Fredericton and Moncton continued to be represented, and there were also delegates from Campbellton, Chatham, McAdam, Milltown, Minto, and Woodstock. They came from at least 20 different unions. One of the two delegates from the Hotel and Restaurant Employees in Saint John was Nellie Thorne, the first woman delegate to appear in the records of the Federation.³²

Meanwhile, the Federation’s support for a labourist political strategy was marked by contradictory impulses. In 1918, delegates had adopted a report calling for labour candidates and a Labour Party, stating that “both political parties are so wedded to the capitalistic interests that it is practically impossible to impress upon them the necessity of working for the interests of the masses.” However, a report on lobbying efforts after the convention drew attention to the enactment of Workmen’s Compensation, stating that the spring session had produced “some first class legislation in the interest and for the benefit of the working class and it only requires renewed interest and activity on the part of the working people of the province to assure further success.”³³ The spring session of the legislature in 1919 again produced reforms, including the achievement of votes for women and the extension of the Compensation Act to workers in the woods. In 1920, there were upward revisions in compensation

30 For biographical details on Melanson, see the entry at <www.lhtnb.ca>. At the 1921 convention Acadian names were not numerous: from Moncton A.D. Goguen (Railway Carmen), Joseph A. Robichaud (Carpenters), and Pat M. Landry (Labour Council), and from Saint John A. Leger (Teamsters).

31 PANB, Moncton and District Labour Council fonds, MC1407, “Convention Call” (1920). Federation stationery at this time featured a broad motto: “Organize, Educate, Federate, Co-Operate.” For example, see PANB, Executive Council Orders, Box 61, folder for 17 April 1920, C.A. Melanson to W.E. Foster.

32 Thorne was noted as one of the credentialed delegates not present at sessions on the first day: *Standard* (12 January 1921). Reported attendance was incomplete, as there were a total of 98 credentialed delegates.

33 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1918. The same session had also produced a Vocational School Act.

rates (for instance, monthly payments to widows were raised from \$20 to \$30 and a clause limiting total compensation to \$3,500 was repealed); there were also amendments to provide free hospital and medical care to injured workers; in addition the Board adopted regulations listing industrial diseases covered by the Act. These reforms were the result of intensive lobbying, what Melanson called “keeping at them.” While acknowledging the cooperation of sitting members, however, Melanson told delegates that “the workers now realize that it is necessary for them to have representatives on the floors of the House, if they ever expect to accomplish anything.”³⁴

Independent political action was strongly favoured by one of the new groups of delegates at the 1920 meetings, a contingent from the Miramichi, five of them from a new union of waterfront workers chartered by the ILA the previous summer. That organization was the outcome of a local rebellion that started on 20 August 1919 when workers at mills and docks along the Miramichi waterfront suddenly stopped work. By the middle of the day a dozen different operations were shut down and some 2,000 men were on strike. Their main demand was a reduction from ten to nine hours in the working day, and a meeting in the town square at Newcastle at once formed a committee to meet with the employers. Their efforts were successful and the strike was settled in favour of the workers before the end of the day; but it was not the end of the agitation. At a public meeting at the Opera House the next evening, Joseph P. Anderson, a returned soldier who worked at one of the mills and led the negotiating committee, proclaimed that slavery was over, the war in Europe was won — and “now it was time for us to be freed from the lumber lords.” Other speakers included the social reformer Henry Harvey Stuart, who urged the advantages of more permanent organization, and the longshoremen’s organizer from Saint John, James Tighe, who undertook to secure a union charter from the ILA. The new organization was formed on the spot, with John S. Martin as secretary-treasurer. The Miramichi Waterfront Union was chartered as Local 825 of the ILA, and claimed 1,600 members by the end of September.³⁵

The Miramichi delegates made a strong impression at the Federation meetings. In 1920, Martin was elected second vice-president, joining Melanson and Melvin and first vice-president Tighe as one of the principal officers of the Federation; meanwhile Stuart was elected as district vice-president for the

34 Ibid., 1919 and 1920. For the order-in-council extending the Compensation Act to workers in the woods, see PANB, Minutes of the Executive Council, RS6, Film 426, 17 April 1919. In 1920, the Factory Act was brought under the Compensation Board; however, there remained only one inspector for the province and recommendations for a female inspector were not acted on.

35 *Chatham Gazette* (22 August 1919); *Chatham World* (23 August 1919); *Union Advocate* (30 September 1919). See also Kim Dunphy, “August 20, 1919: ‘Strike Fever’ on the Miramichi River?” unpublished paper, 15 April 2005.

Miramichi.³⁶ Strategies for political action were hotly debated at the 1920 meetings. Stuart strongly favoured a resolution to cooperate with the United Farmers as “the natural allies of labor,” but that proposal was tabled without a vote, and delegates instead adopted a resolution for the formation of a provincial Independent Labour Party. Following the convention, Melanson predicted a change after the next election: “we will have some of our own men in the house to look after our interests there for us.”³⁷ The same theme was echoed in the pages of the *Union Worker*, a monthly newspaper launched in February 1920, “Devoted to the Interests of Organized Labour in the Province.”³⁸ The *Union Worker* counted itself a strong advocate of independent action and made the case for direct representation in politics: “The time has gone by when a few labor men will get on their knees in a committee room of the house of assembly and be satisfied with that stereotyped phrase, ‘the government will give the matters their serious consideration’. In most cases that was as far as the matter went. The delegates went away pleased that they had basked in the sunshine of the premier and a few of his henchmen for a few minutes instead of being actually thrown out the sacred precincts of the house.”³⁹

36 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1920. Both were important recruits for the union movement. Born at Chatham in 1881, Martin had worked as a clerk for the Snowball enterprises for several years before going into business as a storekeeper on his own account; he was active in community affairs, served on the town council, and was well-known too as a bandmaster who played cornet and violin before he emerged as a leader of the new union in 1919. For his part, Stuart, born near Minto in 1873, was a longtime social reformer who had been a founder of the Fredericton Socialist League in 1902 and the New Brunswick Teachers' Association in 1903; he had come to Newcastle as a newspaper editor and then worked as a school principal and served on the town council for several years. An exponent of the social gospel, Stuart considered socialism to be nothing less than applied Christianity. At the end of the war, he had organized the Northumberland County People's Union and hoped to see broad cooperation among reform groups in the province. Stuart encouraged the Federation to welcome the teachers, and he also hoped for close political cooperation between labour and farmer candidates. See J.K. Chapman, “Henry Harvey Stuart (1873–1952): New Brunswick Reformer,” *Acadiensis*, V, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 79–104.

37 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1920. On this debate, see also *Gleaner* (11 March 1920) and *Union Worker* (April 1920).

38 Although unions did not directly control the newspaper, it received an endorsement from the Federation. The managing editor, A.D. Colwell, was a member of the typographical union and secretary of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council. The newspaper was supported by subscribers and advertisers, although the latter included only a small number of locals in Saint John who purchased cards for the union directory. A report on the Federation meetings underlined the “calm and dignified manner in which President Melanson conducted the proceedings,” and the high quality of discussion and resolutions was seen as an indication that union members were well-qualified to participate in governing the province. *Union Worker* (April 1920).

39 *Union Worker* (February 1920). While supportive of independent labour politics, the newspaper identified itself with a moderate labourism that rejected radical tendencies: “Within the columns, there will be no room for One Big Union ideology, Red Anarchy, Socialism, Bolshevism. The columns will consist of articles written by men in the ranks of labour who have by persistent efforts and honest toil won places for themselves in the community.”

The announcement of a provincial election for 9 October 1920 caught the labour forces unprepared. The Liberals did not hesitate to advertise their record for labour legislation, but they did not return to power without a challenge. In an unprecedented breakthrough in provincial politics, the well-organized agrarian reformers in the United Farmers of New Brunswick elected nine members. The new assembly also included, for the first time, two labour members. Both were from Northumberland County, where John W. Vanderbeck and John S. Martin benefited from the militancy of the lumber workers as well as a working alliance with the farmers in the four-member constituency; Vanderbeck led the polls with 5,663 votes and Martin was elected with 5,111 votes. Vanderbeck had suffered a bad leg injury in 1920 and died shortly after taking his seat in the legislature in 1921; however, his son Abram Vanderbeck won the subsequent by-election by a large margin and served with Martin as a labour member until 1925.⁴⁰ There was also cooperation between farmer and labour interests in Westmorland County, where Stuart (who had taken a position as a school principal at Sunny Brae, near Moncton) was nominated as the labour candidate; however, the school board forced him to withdraw before the election, and James A. Robinson stood in his stead and polled strongly with 4,513 votes. In Moncton labour candidate Clifford Ayer received 1,132 votes, about 25 percent of the total vote, but, to Stuart's dismay, there had been no labour candidates at all in Saint John and no general alliance between farmer and labour forces across the province. Yet the traditional party system had shown its vulnerability, and the Federation meetings in January 1921 again passed resolutions calling for the formation of an Independent Labour Party (ILP). Another resolution expressed "great satisfaction" with "the evident growing good will and cooperation between Labor and the organized Farmers" and urged "all labor men to heartily forward this spirit of solidarity."⁴¹

40 For provincial election results, see *Elections in New Brunswick, 1784–1984* (Fredericton: Legislative Library, 1984). As leader of the ILA local, Martin was, according to a biographical notice in 1922, "selected by laborers as an absolute labor man." He collaborated regularly with the Federation leaders in legislative matters, and the Federation president in 1923, for instance, acknowledged the "cooperation and assistance he received from Brother J.S. Martin, Labor Member for Northumberland Co. who was ready at all times to provide all the assistance possible." *NBFL Proceedings*, 1923. After his term as an MLA, Martin continued to attend as a delegate and was elected a vice-president on several occasions. Less is known about Vanderbeck, who was born at Renous in 1864 and traced his roots back to New Jersey Loyalists who settled at Fredericton in 1783. He worked for the Snowball interests, both as an overseer and mill manager. Like Martin he was active in community affairs, serving on the county board of health; he too was known as a musician and "played a unique twelve-string guitar." See *Prominent People of the Maritime Provinces* (Saint John: Canadian Publicity Co., 1922), 124, and W.D. Hamilton, *Dictionary of Miramichi Biography* (Saint John: n.p., 1997), 225, 390–1.

41 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1921. There was no political breakthrough in the subsequent 1921 Dominion election. In Westmorland the local ILP endorsed Albert E. Trites as a Farmer-Labour candidate, and in Saint John Fred A. Campbell of the street railway union ran as the labour candidate on the

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

Even at this relatively high point in the influence of labour, the scope of representation at the Federation was far from complete. In January 1914, delegates had represented 18 of the 101 existing union locals in the province; in January 1921, they represented 34 of the 128 locals in the province identified by the Department of Labour — an increased proportion but still only slightly more than one in four union locals in the province. In 1922, the cotton mill workers at Milltown, members of Local 1394, United Textile Workers of America, were represented by two women delegates, Lettie Glover and Sara Shannon; they were welcomed and both were elected to executive positions (Glover as third vice-president and Shannon as vice-president for Charlotte County); but a year later there were no delegates at all from their local, and it would be another 22 years before women delegates appeared again. Similarly, the coal miners, who appeared at the 1920 and 1921 meetings and submitted resolutions for the inspection and regulation of coal mines in the province, also disappeared from future meetings, their United Mine Workers of America local broken by employer resistance and not re-established until 1937. The total number of delegates appointed to the Federation meetings declined from the peak number in 1921 to much smaller numbers for the remainder of the decade, reaching a low of 25 delegates in 1925 and increasing only to 33 by 1929.⁴²

Meanwhile, there was also a change in the leadership of the Federation. Melanson had stepped down as president in 1921 and later that year took a post as an assistant city clerk at Moncton City Hall.⁴³ In making adjustments to a more defensive position after 1921, the Federation had an experienced union leader at the helm. James Edmund Tighe was already a power on the Saint John labour scene before the formation of the Federation in 1913, and in the 1920s he rose rapidly in the ranks of his international union. Tighe was born in Saint John in 1878 and as a young man worked on several railway lines in Canada and the United States, experiences that introduced him to the international labour movement. When he returned to Saint John and went to work on the docks, he helped bring the local longshoremen's union into affiliation with the International Longshoremen's Association in 1911. By 1912, he was the business agent for ILA 273, also a vice-president of the international, and a leading

Farmer-Labour ticket in St. John-Albert. Both finished in third place, Trites with 3,059 votes and Campbell with 1,224 votes. Labour candidates showed more success in municipal politics in this period, most notably in Moncton, where Melanson himself had been elected an alderman at large in 1919 and again in 1920 and 1921, as were several other labour candidates.

42 Credentialed delegates numbered 48 in 1922, 38 in 1923, 42 in 1924, 25 in 1925, 26 in 1926, and 33 in 1928 and 1929; actual attendance was usually somewhat lower.

43 Melanson later became the city's receiver of taxes. He remained a leading citizen in Moncton, serving as a director of *L'Évangéline*. His labour background was not forgotten, however. He was appointed a member of the province's Civil Service Commission in 1944, and as late as 1956 he was welcomed at the Federation convention as one of the early pioneers.

force in the ILA's Atlantic Coast District. He was considered a pioneer of the Federation, as he was present at the original meeting in September 1913 and played an active part in the campaign for changes in the compensation laws. On several occasions he was elected a vice-president, most recently at the 1919 and 1920 meetings.⁴⁴

In Tighe's first report as president in 1922, he was forced to draw attention to troubled economic conditions throughout the province. Workers faced shut-downs, wage cuts, and unemployment, as well as a growing number of strikes and lockouts provoked by employers who refused to accept collective bargaining: "when the employers are approached they refuse to recognize the organizations and wish to adopt 'individual bargaining'." The situation at the street railway in Saint John was particularly alarming in light of their battle for recognition in 1914, yet in May 1921 the New Brunswick Power Company announced wage reductions and stated that the union contract would not be renewed. A conciliation board on which Hatheway represented the men failed to convince the company to make an agreement, even with reduced wages. Instead there was a lockout, strikebreakers were brought in from Montréal and other locations, and this was followed by crowd attacks on the cars, and parades of support for the strikers, but there was no settlement. The union started a Union Bus Company to provide an alternative jitney service on many routes in the summer and fall, with Fred A. Campbell, an officer of the union, as president. The bus operations were harassed by fines and by-laws and eventually collapsed, as did the strike; the conflict ended when officers of the Trades and Labour Council were arrested for unlawful assembly for parading in support of the strike.⁴⁵ The deteriorating conditions were documented in the pages of the *Union Worker*: "Unemployment is rampant and the 'big interests' are taking every advantage of the situation to crush the worker under the iron heel of the golden god." Nonetheless, the newspaper had little to suggest by way of strategy: "It will be well to give a little for the time being and when matters assume a more nearly normal state improvement in working conditions can be advocated and insisted upon."⁴⁶ The *Union Worker* itself ceased publication in April 1922.

The turn to a more cautious approach was already evident at the 1921 meetings. In part it took the form of adherence to the increasingly conservative

44 For biographical details on Tighe, see the entry at <www.lhtnb.ca>. A more detailed account is forthcoming in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XVI.

45 The conflict is documented in LAC, Records of the Department of Labour, RG27, Strikes and Lockouts, vol. 327, file 161. For a recent treatment, in the context of the breakdown of a progressive consensus in Saint John, see Don Nerbas, "The Changing World of the Bourgeoisie in Saint John, New Brunswick in the 1920s" (M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2006), 113–20.

46 *Union Worker* (August 1921).

and exclusionist policies of the TLC, especially under the presidency of Tom Moore, who had replaced the socialist James C. Watters in 1918. Melanson had encouraged all unions in the province to join the Federation, regardless of their history or affiliations, but this was no longer an acceptable policy. The most relevant test case in 1921 was the status of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees (CBRE), founded at Moncton in 1908 by Intercolonial Railway workers, but expelled from the TLC in 1920 for failing to resolve jurisdictional conflicts with the International Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks. At the Federation meetings a special motion was presented to enable CBRE members to participate as fraternal delegates, a position supported by delegates such as Stuart, who argued that “everything possible should be done to keep all branches of labor in agreement and to heal all existing differences.”⁴⁷ However, the expulsion was confirmed by the TLC convention later in 1921, and the 1922 Federation meetings even included an evening dance and social sponsored by the rival Brotherhood. Meanwhile, TLC loyalists in New Brunswick had also directed attacks at other labour organizations that challenged the place of the TLC as the principal house of labour. The One Big Union movement was early on identified as “One Big Failure,” contrary to the spirit of true trade unionism (and was more fully denounced when it organized coal miners in Minto a few years later); and the formation of a Catholic trade union centre in Québec was also deplored: “The formation of Unions on a Provincial Religious basis cuts deeply into national unions; employers are not so organized.”⁴⁸

Even in a time of contraction, Tighe was reluctant to suspend the Federation’s reform agenda, which continued to include a significant number of proposals.⁴⁹ The most important new initiative was the call for protective legislation for women workers and lone mothers, a campaign in which the Federation collaborated with groups such as the Local Councils of Women in a characteristic early maternal and labour feminist effort to assist those whom they regarded as the most vulnerable workers in the labour market. Progress was notably slow. In 1921 the Federation called for a Minimum Wage Act, with a board empowered to investigate the wages, hours, and conditions of female

47 *Standard* (12 January 1921). A debate arising from the executive report at the 1921 meetings also seemed to indicate the increased subordination of the Federation to the TLC. This involved a requirement that the Federation’s legislative programme be submitted to the Trades and Labour Congress. See *NBFL Proceedings*, 1921, and *Telegraph* (13 January 1921).

48 *Union Worker* (March 1920 and September 1921); *Gleaner* (18 March 1926).

49 The 1921 meetings had called for the creation of a full Department of Labour, with a minister to be a member of cabinet. When this reform was not forthcoming, the Federation supported proposals to consolidate the administration of the Factory and Compensation Acts under a single board, pending the establishment of a proper Department of Labour. There was also considerable discussion of the labour provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, and Federation delegates participated in national meetings to discuss how to implement these provisions in Canada.

workers and issue binding orders. A related proposal called for a Mothers' Pensions Board to administer support for impoverished mothers of dependent children. A year later Tighe reported that the province had agreed to appoint a commission to investigate the matter and that the Federation had nominated a Saint John union man, F.S.A. McMullin, and Estella Sugrue, the spouse of the former Federation president.⁵⁰ By the time of the 1923 meetings, however, the commission still had not been established. It was finally appointed on 12 September 1923 and included the two Federation nominees. Progress was reported in 1924, and a report was tabled in March 1925.⁵¹ Soon afterwards, the Conservatives returned to power; but after 1925 there were no labour members in the assembly to provide assistance to the Federation, and Premier J.B.M. Baxter was less sympathetic to labour reform than his Liberal predecessors. Again, in 1926, the Federation passed resolutions urging the introduction of Minimum Wage and Mothers' Allowance Acts, to which they also added a call for legislation to enable the province to participate in the Dominion plan for old age pensions. In 1927, the Federation demanded to know whether any of the additional revenues secured for the province by the contemporary Maritime Rights campaign, which Tighe had supported, could be applied to implementing "at least some of this most urgent social legislation." Baxter's response was unequivocal: "insofar as the increased subsidy from the Federal Government was concerned there would be none of it available for such legislation."⁵²

The Federation was more successful in protecting its major legislative achievement. In the years after 1918, Sugrue himself appeared regularly at the Federation meetings to report on the administration and progress of workmen's compensation. At the 1923 meetings, however, Tighe drew attention to "the various attempts by the employers to destroy legislation by amendment." He recommended that in addition to securing passage of Mothers' Allowance and Minimum Wage Acts, efforts be focused on resisting employers' attacks on the Compensation Act. Resolutions from Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John urged action, and the convention endorsed a plan to collaborate with the railway unions, which were also alarmed about the situation. The labour concerns could not be ignored, and Premier P. J. Veniot appeared at the convention to

50 In recommending Sugrue, George Melvin had written: "Mrs. Sugrue as you no doubt know is the wife of Mr. J.L. Sugrue Commissioner on the Workmen's Compensation Board, and through his wide knowledge and experience of the Labor Movement and what it stands for and advocates, has herself acquired [sic] considerable knowledge of these matters." PANB, Executive Council Orders, RS9, Box 65, folder for 12 September 1923, Melvin to P.J. Veniot, 9 June 1921.

51 PANB, RS6, Minutes of Executive Council, 12 September 1923; *Journals of the House of Assembly*, 1925, 22; *Labour Gazette* (April 1925), 331. No copy of the report has come to light.

52 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1927.

announce that he would call a conference of employers and unions to discuss any possible changes to the Act.⁵³ Veniot delayed the joint conference until January 1924, when it met for three days in Saint John under his chairmanship. The employers, led by Angus McLean of the Lumbermen's Association, were proposing to reduce the scale of benefits to the 1918 level, reduce two of the three commissioners to part-time duties, and permit employers to carry their own insurance in place of the government plan. Labour spokesmen, including representatives from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, defended the existing system and advanced a list of amendments to improve benefits and increase the powers of the board.⁵⁴ By the end of the conference, it was clear that the provincial government was not prepared to accept the changes demanded by the employers.⁵⁵ The issue did not entirely disappear after the 1925 election. Tighe warned in 1926 that employers were again mustering their influence to have sections of the Act repealed. However, when Premier Baxter appeared before the convention that year, he assured the delegates that he was strongly in favour of the legislation and that it "would not be interfered with by the Government."⁵⁶ Although there was still conflict over administrative procedures and a need for improved benefits, this appeared to be the end of sustained attacks on the underlying principles of the Compensation Act.⁵⁷

Unemployment and underemployment remained concerns throughout the 1920s, as large numbers of workers continued to leave the province for work. In 1925, Tighe lamented the poor conditions of employment and the number of industries that had been closed down, "which were forcing many of our best tradesmen to move either to the United States or Western Canada." In the context of the deepening crisis, Tighe allied himself with the employer-dominated Maritime Rights movement and was one of the few labour leaders to participate

53 Ibid., 1923. At this time Veniot also announced that he would appoint the desired Commission on Mothers' Allowance and Minimum Wage Acts. The 1923 minutes report that Veniot was the first provincial premier to speak at the Federation meetings and noted that "he stated that while he could not promise that we would get every thing we asked for, yet the doors of the Government would always be open to our representatives."

54 *Labour Gazette* (February 1924), 135–7. The Federation's agitation focused in part on raising minimum payments for disabilities and fatalities.

55 The employers' position was badly undermined by the fact that McLean's own Bathurst Lumber Company had refused to pay assessments; as one union resolution pointed out, the situation had forced other sectors to carry the costs of accidents occurring at recalcitrant establishments. The company's attempt to evade the Act was the subject of legal action by the Board, which resulted in an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, decided in favour of the Board in March 1924. See *Labour Gazette* (December 1923), 1455, and (April 1924), 350.

56 *Gleaner* (18 March 1926).

57 There were objections, however, to the appointment of a labour representative to a royal commission on the administration of compensation in the lumber industry without consultation with the Federation. *Gleaner* (23 March 1927).

in the Great Delegation to Ottawa, where the interests of the port of Saint John were strongly promoted. Yet even with new industrial developments underway in the north of the province in the later 1920s, Tighe noted that employers failed to give preference to New Brunswick workers. In 1928, his frustration was evident when he objected that the employment of workers with “unpronounceable names” was “forcing our own men to continue leaving the Province.” His concerns were also shared by delegates who objected to the recruitment of Welsh miners for work in the coalfields, and a resolution was adopted in favour of excluding immigrants from the mining district.⁵⁸

Tighe had already expressed a wish to retire from office in 1925, perhaps believing that his own association with the Liberal Party put the Federation at a disadvantage in dealing with the new Conservative government. In 1927, Tighe was elected first vice-president of the ILA, which strengthened his influence at the highest levels of the international union, placing him second only to “King” Joe Ryan of New York, who dominated the affairs of the ILA for several decades.⁵⁹ Before stepping down in 1929, Tighe had the satisfaction of reporting that the TLC would once again meet in Saint John, as it had in 1914. Though no longer president by the time of the meetings in August 1929, Tighe was headlined in the local press as “The Man Who Brought Labor Congress to Saint John.”⁶⁰

As in 1914, there was a large attendance of New Brunswick delegates, indeed somewhat larger than at the Federation meetings earlier in the year: 22 delegates from Saint John, as well as nine Moncton delegates (including the new Federation president, Moncton machinist E.R. Steeves), four from McAdam, and one each from Fredericton and Campbellton. Premier Baxter and former premier Veniot, now a member of the Dominion cabinet, both addressed the convention, and TLC President Moore expressed the hope that the province would make advances in enacting labour legislation. In welcoming the delegates, Saint John labour council president James Whitebone, a future Federation president, pointed out the significance of Saint John in Canadian labour history, noting that the delegates’ badges included a replica of the water-front bell erected by the Labourers’ Benevolent Association in 1849. It was,

58 *NBFL Proceedings*, 1928; *Gleaner* (9 March 1928).

59 Tighe returned as NBFL president in 1934–1936. In 1929, Tighe’s successor as president was Eugene R. Steeves, like Melanson a member of the machinists’ union in Moncton. Steeves had attended the NBFL meetings since 1919 and in 1920 was elected district vice-president for Moncton. He became first vice president in 1925 and 1926 and again in 1928, before winning election as president in 1929. For biographical information, see entry at <www.lhtnb.ca>.

60 *Telegraph-Journal* (29 August 1929). As in 1914, the province agreed to provide a grant to support the event, in this case \$1,500. See PANB, RS9, Box 73, folder for 18 July 1929. Also in 1929, the province approved advertising expenditures in connection with Moncton meetings of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. PANB, RS9, Box 73, folder for 20 August 1929.

said Whitebone, “the bell which had first rung out the message of hope for the workers and marked the beginning of the struggle for the shorter work day.”⁶¹

Whitebone also introduced the Rt. Hon. J.H. “Jimmy” Thomas, a longtime leader of the National Union of Railwaymen in Britain. His presence served to underline the transnational context of the labour movement, much as the visit by Leonora O’Reilly had done in 1914. Thomas himself had started work at 12 years of age and come to prominence as a union leader and then as a minister in the 1924 Labour government; in 1929 he was a member of Ramsay MacDonald’s second Labour administration, with special responsibility for unemployment. Even before he spoke, the delegates gave Thomas a standing ovation and three loud cheers, and he went on to deliver an address that, according to one reporter, “convulsed the gathering with merriment.” On a more serious note, Thomas stated that he would never forget his humble origins and his main goals in public life: “To bring comfort, happiness and hope to homes that are downtrodden is the greatest source of satisfaction to any man.” Yet Thomas was very much a moderate within the world of labour. He had opposed the British General Strike in 1926, and his message in Saint John conveyed a narrower version of trade union consciousness than articulated by O’Reilly 15 years earlier. In Saint John he warned Canadian unionists to pursue cautious policies in the years ahead: “Speaking of the progress the labour movement had made in the past he said that this had been accomplished by the process of evolution rather than revolution. Revolution and bloodshed never did anything for the workers, he said and warned the delegates to beware of those who advocated the ‘short cut’ to Labor’s aims.”⁶²

At the end of this first chapter in the history of the Federation, provincial labour solidarity was indeed evolving slowly in respect to structure and representation. Its meetings remained relatively small, smaller than warranted by the presence of unions and workers in the province. The large attendance in 1920 and 1921 corresponded to a high tide in expectations of common action, but most union locals in the province did not send delegates or take part in the Federation’s work. Only two or three women delegates had taken a seat at the meetings; most of the railway brotherhoods did not attend and collaborated only on issues of shared interest; there were still relatively few Acadian delegates; members of “outlaw” organizations such as the CBRE and the OBU were not welcome. Although there was occasional representation from smaller cen-

61 *TLC Proceedings*, 1929, 3, 137, 185 *et passim*. For the occasion there was also a substantial publication, a *History of Saint John Labor Unions, compiled and Issued by the Saint Trades and Labor Council and Subordinate Unions*, an additional indication of local historical consciousness.

62 *TLC Proceedings*, 1929, 6–7; *Evening Times-Globe* (27 August 1929). On Thomas, see *Dictionary of National Biography, 1941–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 875–7.

tres, most delegates were from Moncton and Saint John, and the meetings were almost always in Fredericton, to coincide with the spring session of the legislative assembly, where the Federation directed much of its attention. Ambitions for social and economic democracy, spelled out in the Reconstruction Programme of 1919, had been sharply curtailed by the experience of the 1920s. Some employers accepted union members; others tolerated them; many refused to hire union members at all or to engage in any form of collective bargaining; it would be another decade before the Federation was able to address issues of union recognition and collective bargaining with greater effect.

Despite significant failures in mobilization and engagement, there was nonetheless a record of limited achievement in negotiations with the provincial state. The Federation had helped win the establishment of vocational schools in several locations and had collaborated with women's organizations in obtaining free textbooks for students up to grade Eight. They had assisted women in gaining the vote and they had helped elect the first two labour members to the Legislative Assembly. There was a growing body of regulatory legislation to supplement the earlier Factory Act of 1905, and the Federation had secured a Workmen's Compensation Act that provided modest but relatively certain benefits to injured workers and their families; the unions had fought back hostile amendments, and a former president had helped shape the administration of the Act. The rhetoric calling for "new conceptions of human liberty, justice and opportunity" was little heard at union meetings by the end of the decade, but this did not put an end to the list of reforms on the labour agenda. Their letters and petitions were considered at cabinet meetings, and their recommendations for amendments and appointments were often accepted. Their annual conventions were considered notable public events, welcomed by city mayors; Premiers Veniot and Baxter initiated the tradition of addressing the meetings, even when they were sure to face criticism from the delegates.

The experience of the Federation of Labour in these early years confirms the existence of strong progressive impulses within the region in the first decades of the twentieth century. These were followed by the moment of reconstruction at the end of the Great War and then by years of regional crisis that narrowed but did not entirely eclipse the scope of its reform ambitions. In Sugrue, Melanson, and Tighe, the Federation had produced leaders who were bearers of a trade union consciousness, pragmatists rather than radicals, bureaucrats rather than militants. They remained confident in the ability of a capitalist democracy to accommodate the needs of the working class, and they considered recognition of the Federation as the voice of labour in the province to be a necessary element in this process. For union stalwarts, such as Fredericton labour council president George Crawford, a bricklayer who had been in attendance at almost every meeting since 1914 and addressed the convention in 1927, the Federation of Labour was "an unselfish organization working in the

PROVINCIAL SOLIDARITIES: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK
FEDERATION OF LABOUR, 1913–1929

interests of both organized and unorganized labour in the province.” His sense of satisfaction was marked by a warning that “every effort must be made by the Federation to maintain what had been secured for labour.”⁶³ To recall the terms of the hopeful predictions in 1913, the Federation had constructed itself more as a “legislative medium” than a “fighting machine.” Provincial solidarities remained partial and contingent, their transactions limited and their acceleration not rapid, but the Federation of Labour had nonetheless become “an accomplished fact” within provincial society.

* * *

DAVID FRANK teaches Canadian history at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, where he is director of the New Brunswick Labour History Project. His previous publications include *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1999).

DAVID FRANK enseigne l’histoire du Canada à l’Université du Nouveau-Brunswick à Fredericton, où il dirige le projet d’histoire du travail au Nouveau-Brunswick. Il a entre autres signé l’ouvrage *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto, James Lorimer and Company, 1999).

63 *Gleaner* (22 March 1927).